Aims and topics
This research, funded by the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, makes recommendations to improve direct access and short-term accommodation services for homeless women with severe mental illness. The report focuses on women who have experienced street homelessness and have used these services. 'Severe mental illness' is defined in terms of diagnosis of disorders, impaired ability to lead a 'normal' life, and duration of at least six months. The report introduces issues of homelessness and mental health, before focusing on direct access accommodation in London, exploring both the range and the practices of existing provision. The views of female project users were investigated, and staff training and support needs were taken into account.

Key findings and recommendations
* While most women users are white, project staff have seen increasing numbers of black women, refugees and asylum seekers.
* The projects surveyed emphasise the importance of working with external agencies, and hostels offering higher levels of support were found to also have greater contact with mental health professionals and organisations.
* Hostels were found to struggle with admissions of women with mental illness, basing decisions on individual need balanced with the needs of other residents and existing resources. Staffing levels, knowledge of individual women and confidentiality practices were found to act as barriers to effective decision making.
* The report found direct access accommodation able to meet the women's accommodation needs in the short term, but questions the projects' abilities to meet mental health needs over a longer period.
* The report recommends that hostel staff receive both training to work more effectively with people with mental illness, and regular supervision to meet their needs for support.
* Further recommendations consider the physical environment of hostels, admissions policies, the exchange of information between agencies, record-keeping, and staffing issues. Improved communication between agencies is argued to be key to providing effective and appropriate services.

Methods
* 48 agencies providing direct access services were identified in London, of which 13 were for women only. Semi-structured telephone interviews were carried out with managers of 40 of these agencies, including 16 which were for men only.
* 14 hostels were selected for follow-up, and in-depth interviews and small group discussions were carried out with staff. This selection included all but two of the women-only hostels and three mixed hostels.
* Discussions were held with representatives of specialist mental health services including the four central London mental health teams funded under
the HMII, two voluntary sector street outreach teams, and three day centres for homeless people providing services specifically for women.

* 17 women service users were interviewed.

Location
London

Comments
This is a sound and useful study, although the sample of women service users was lower than intended because of difficulties experienced in arranging interviews. The report contains some interesting reflections on the research process, with agencies commenting on being burdened by repeated participation in research, and expressing concerns about the limited dissemination of findings.